



# Exploring skill recognition options for refugees and host communities

Learnings from Skills Certification and Accreditation Pilots in Kampala and Nairobi



## Background

Kenya and Uganda are two of the largest refugee-hosting countries in Africa, with over 550,000 refugees (UNHCR, April 2022) and 1.5 million refugees residing in each country, respectively (UNHCR, September 2022). Although many refugees reside in refugee designated areas (refugee camps or settlements), an increasing number of refugees gravitate towards the capital cities of Kampala and Nairobi in search of better opportunities.

The refugee populations in Kampala and Nairobi are diverse: Somalis, Congolese, and South Sudanese comprise the majority and often live amongst their own communities in neighborhoods throughout the cities. Not only do refugees bring their culture and customs to their new home, they also bring vocational and professional skills – catering, photography, plumbing, information technology, teaching, tailoring, hairdressing, welding, mechanics and repair, etc. – and knowledge from higher education – engineering, architecture, pharmacy, nursing and midwifery, finance and accounting, etc. – that have positive implications for the local economies and the host communities of the host countries. However, to participate in trading or find wage employment using their skill areas, refugees need to have the skills certified in the host country or have their formal education degrees accredited to the host country's standards, both of which require extensive documentation, high costs, and navigating bureaucracy. In the interim, some may set up informal businesses at risk of police or city authority harassment while others may seek employment unrelated to their trade.

Many refugees and vulnerable host community members operate in the informal sector. While many of them have experience and mastery in their fields, they do not have formal education or qualifications/certification in these skills. Their expertise has been achieved through self-teaching, practice, mentorship, and apprenticeship. Despite their expertise, the lack of formal recognition of their skills through certification has remained a barrier to their access to opportunities of employment and formalization of their labor engagements.

Increasingly, NGOs and implementing organizations have been encouraged to provide skills accreditation and certification (recognition of prior learning) as an intervention to improving economic well-being among refugees in countries in which they have the legal right to work., as it is a core component of documentation challenges that remain a major barrier to employment. Both avenues are thought to be more cost-effective ways of achieving employment for refugees, as retaking professional trainings and certification of courses can be costly. The impetus for this work stems in part from the International Labor Organization's (ILO) scoping study of skills certification and accreditation in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region. Despite the insistence to carry out this seemingly straightforward process, little guidance or documentation has been developed on how it should or has been done, nor on extensively examining the challenges implementing organizations may face while navigating complex bureaucratic systems and multi-level political relationships.

Under a 5-year initiative entitled Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development (Re:BUiLD) funded by the IKEA Foundation, the IRC piloted skills certification programs in Kampala, Uganda and Nairobi, Kenya and documented the process to date from the client and implementor perspectives. Through this piloting, our goal was to understand the feasibility and scalability of these programs within IRC. This brief explores the successes, challenges, and learnings from IRC's implementation to date in both cities, as well as key take-aways for the sector and for IRC's future work. The information is presented per pilot, with all points relevant to both countries unless specified otherwise.

### Definitions

**Certificate accreditation:** is a process that involves equating or aligning one's education certificates or degrees from their country of origin to the standards of education in the country of residence.

**Skills certification via recognition of prior learning (RPL):** is a process that involves having one's technical skills acquired informally or formally to be assessed in a specific domain by a governing body such that one may receive a certificate confirming one's capabilities.

## Pilot designs and roll-out

Through small-scale pilots, we aimed to assess the demand, feasibility, and potential impact for scalability of the 2 skills certification approaches as a pathway for improving self-reliance for urban refugees. The pilots were scheduled to run from October 2021 – June 2022. During the pilot period, IRC intended to: engage accrediting and certification institutions and map out the processes, requirements and costs; recruit qualifying participants; facilitate their skill certification and; support linkages for employment opportunities. Table 1 highlights the targeted number of clients versus actual number of clients recruited per pilot per city.

Table 1. Number of clients targeted and recruited

	Kampala		Nairobi	
	Target	Actual	Target	Actual
Certificate Accreditation	30	35	50	16
Skills Certification via RPL	50	36	90	95 (83) Qualified

## Certificate accreditation

**Recruitment & demand:** The IRC began by utilizing its conventional means of client mobilization via direct information sharing with clients, but found it was not identifying the profile of clients who qualified for the service: those with previous country of origin educational achievements that were seeking to have them accredited to Ugandan or Kenyan standards. Certificate accreditation was a new service offered by IRC and its requirements and impacts were not familiar to refugee communities. Instead, we pivoted to targeted mobilization through community leaders and social media campaigns. For example, we leveraged community forums to spread awareness and sent out an advert through [Julisha.info](http://Julisha.info) in Kenya. Some clients were also recruited through referral by Nairobi-based partners.

The recruitment process was constrained by numerous challenges, including the need to conduct mass community sensitization sessions, incomplete documentation from potential clients that would disqualify them from undergoing accreditation, and fear of releasing personal information to government agencies and embassies, particularly for political refugees.

In Uganda, we were able to identify 35 potential clients, a majority of whom were from the Ethiopia and Eritrean communities. Out of the 35 clients, 11 possessed qualifications in marketable courses and were prioritized as the first set of clients to have their academic certificates submitted to the National Council of Higher Education for processing. In Kenya, for clients to be officially recruited, they attended an info-session that provided an overview of certification accreditation, the accrediting institution (KNQA), and potential opportunities presented by having your certificate accredited. The clients were then registered by the project case workers upon presenting their academic certificates for accreditation. Out of the 16 clients in Kenya who were shortlisted, six clients rescinded their interest and asked for their applications to not be submitted to the KNQA.

**Accreditation processes:** We mapped out the institutions, costs, and requirements for certificate equation or alignment in each country. In Uganda, the main institutions included: The Ugandan National Examination Board, a government body mandated by law to equate primary and secondary education certificates, and the National Council of Higher Education, a government body mandated to equate tertiary certificates, diplomas, degrees, and post-degree qualifications. To accredit primary or secondary school certificates, the government required clients to provide extensive documentation to demonstrate their educational achievement and identity. Besides academic accreditation by Uganda National Examination Board and National Council of Higher Education, clients were required to obtain membership from relevant professional bodies like Engineers Registration Board, Pharmaceutical Society of Uganda, Uganda Nurses and Midwives Council, etc., to be legally eligible to be either employed or self-employed in the field. Moreover, the minimum processing period was three months, a lengthy period to wait if clients have economic opportunities readily available that are dependent on accreditation.

In Kenya, once a client was deemed eligible to participate and presented all relevant documents, the IRC uploaded the client's certificate to [Kenya National Qualification Authority \(KNQA\)](http://Kenya National Qualification Authority (KNQA) portal) portal for verification. The validation process followed the Kenya National Qualification Framework awarded by Foreign Universities and Qualifications awarding bodies in accordance with KNQF Regulations. Upon validation, KNQA would issue equivalence certification for the client.

## Skills certification via RPL:

**Recruitment & demand:** Like the certificate accreditation pilot, the recognition of prior learning pilot also required extensive recruitment efforts to ensure effective targeting and participant identification. The IRC collaborated with community leaders and community-based organizations to identify 50 qualifying clients in Uganda and 83 clients in Kenya. Ninety-five clients had been initially identified in Kenya, but twelve of them did not have skills that could be covered by RPL such as music and artistic skills, catering, photography, and electrical installations. Although the IRC identified the target number of clients, the recruitment process was challenging. There was a lack of interest among clients as this was a new service offered by IRC; many asked to be placed for vocational services instead, a well-known and established program that clients associate with IRC. Other challenges were related to difficulties presented by limited opportunities for clients whose skills were from industries with little promise for marketable employment. After taking the first batch of clients through the process in Kenya, we noticed an increase in interest among the communities from which the clients came from, suggesting that peer-to-peer sharing may be more effective than top-down community sensitization for skills certification.



**RPL Process:** In Uganda, IRC engaged institutions which were approved to provide RPL services by the Directorate of Industrial Training (DIT). Clients could either complete a modular assessment or a workers pass assessment, the former assessing a broad set of skills (ex. tailoring exam for men’s, women’s, and children’s garments) and the latter targeting a specific skill or two (ex. tailoring exam for men’s garments only).

Identified clients were enrolled into the institutions. Each institute registered the clients, identified the technical areas of expertise, collected all relevant documentation, and engaged DIT to reserve an assessment date. The institutes provided a package, also known as a catalyst, to clients that contained the materials required to complete the assessments and informed them of the test date. The IRC then received an invoice from the institutes who had paid the exam fees directly to DIT. Ideally, this full preparation process typically takes a few days before the exam. Results are typically expected two to four weeks post the assessment. In reality, it took between three to five months for clients to receive their results and certificates from the submission date. To date, all 36 clients have been assessed; twenty-eight successfully passed their exams and six failed to pass.

Since the IRC has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Kenya National Qualification Authority (KNQA), the governing body responsible for administering exams and producing certificates, we shared the list of clients directly with the KNQA. The KNQA was responsible for communicating the exam dates to clients and delivering results within approximately two months. Through this pilot, the KNQA were able to identify significant gaps in their skill selection model. They noted that they’re not able to serve a majority of the informal labor skill market as people tend to specialize in a single skill or subsets of skills and work as a part of a value chain as opposed to having multiple skills within a certain trade. To date, five clients have completed and successfully passed skills certification via the KNQA in tailoring and automotive mechanics and have successfully passed their technical assessments. A second group of clients who had more general skills within a trade were submitted to the KNQA in October 2022 and were assessed in December 2022. The remaining 41 clients who have single specialized skills were submitted to the KNQA in October 2022 and are waiting for modifications to the assessment process before the exam can proceed.

Table 2. Costs per client invested by IRC

	Kampala	Nairobi
Certificate Accreditation	\$81 USD	\$74 USD
Skills Certification via RPL	Varies by trade - \$478 USD on average	\$186 USD

## What we've learned so far

### Certificate accreditation

#### Limited demand

Although we conducted extensive recruitment and sensitization of what certificate accreditation is, the demand for this service remained low in both countries. This may partly be attributed to the lack of awareness of accreditation possibilities in the refugee community. The few who were aware of the possibilities were also aware of the complexities in the process and thus had little confidence in the process. In Uganda, clients who were interested in certificate accreditation were either keen to practice in their field of expertise or had economic opportunities available to them in their field, but only could formally accept those opportunities if they had their certificates accredited in Uganda. Reasons behind the low demand for primary secondary and university education certificates included lack of documentation (as many refugees lose their documents during flight), including having only camp-based IDs (primarily in Kenya), and bureaucracy involved in the entire certificate accreditation process.

#### Coordination with embassies and government agencies

Before IRC could send clients to government agencies for accreditation, it was necessary to coordinate with embassies to secure additional documentation. While we encountered no difficulties in working with the embassies of Somalia and South Sudan in Uganda, we faced challenges with the embassies of Ethiopia and Eritrea. This stemmed from an education policy in both countries in which the government pays for their citizens' tuition, but in return, every citizen is expected to participate in national service for a specified period post-graduation. Upon graduation, citizens are given a temporary certificate to ensure that they don't leave the country and do not receive the official certificate until their national service is completed. To process the accreditation applications, the Ugandan government needs to receive authorization from the respective embassy associated with the client's country of origin. However, this presented additional constraints for clients who were political refugees. Many Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Burundian clients were not comfortable to have their names and information presented to their embassies, particularly as embassy staff are politically appointed by the national governments.



In Kenya, clients from francophone countries such as DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda, shared similar fears over only being able to produce documents in French and lacked confidence in the English-speaking government processes. Overall, collaboration with government agencies has been affected by continued delays on the part of the KNQA similar to the ones we've faced with skills certification, as well as contractual payment challenges from the IRC to process payments to the KNQA. As of May 2023, the KNQA has notified us that certificates should be ready by November 2023 as the process takes up to a year to complete.

#### Varying curriculums and regional education standards

When we met with the Ugandan National Examining Board to outline the background and needs of IRC clients, we were informed that for certain countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi, the Ugandan government can only equate primary-level certificates due to the lack of national examination boards in these countries. For Burundians, accreditation of any secondary- or tertiary-level certificates would be processed on a case-by-case basis.

Additional challenges existed for certain higher education degrees and certificates due to country-specific curriculum and regulations. For example, lawyers are trained in the law of the country in which they undergo their training - in Uganda, lawyers practice common law while in Burundi, lawyers practice civil law. Generally, nationals of other countries, including the East African Community (EAC), are required to complete a Ugandan post-graduate diploma to become a registered member of the Ugandan law society and legally be allowed to practice law.

## **Skills certification via RPL**

### **Recruitment**

At the start of the recruitment phase, we encountered several challenges related to clients' understanding of what recognition of prior learning and skills certification encompasses. When we researched how to best term this phrase based on clients' local languages, there wasn't clear terminology for us to use which was tied closely to local community leaders knowing few people who had undergone such a process. Across both cities, it took time to explain the concept and its benefits to the leaders and necessitated information sessions with community members to gauge meaningful interest. Our team stressed the importance of certification and the myriad of opportunities it can create. Even then, we relied on a snowballing method to identify the targeted number of clients for the program.

During client interviews and community information sessions in Nairobi, we noted a strong selling point for skills certification. For the most part, clients were either already working informally or were running their own businesses, so they didn't need to enroll in vocational training, nor did they have the time to take time off to do so, as this would have disrupted their income generation. Instead, sitting a one-time exam fit better with working clients' schedules.

In Kampala, it became clear that clients had a different understanding of the minimum skill level or experience appropriate for undergoing the DIT assessment and receiving the certificate. For example, some thought that if one can cook, one could qualify as a chef. Among those that did qualify for skills certification, some clients said that they'd rather attend a vocational training, a program that is in high demand and often has a waitlist, despite already demonstrating competence in the field. Some said that they'd prefer to refresh their skills before sitting an exam while others wanted to switch trades or participate in a program that is highly associated with IRC. Additionally, most potential clients were already engaged in some form of income-generating activity; for example, some were operating businesses informally. This presents a question on the relevance of skills certification – if clients already have opportunities within their field of interest without having formal certification, would getting a certificate increase the amount of money they could potentially earn?

## **Coordinating with government agencies**

In Uganda, the DIT has a set list of trades or skills that it can certify, which we were aware of and utilized as one of our targeting criteria during recruitment. However, we soon learned that for DIT to deploy their resources in a cost-effective manner, they require at least five people be brought forward for certification. Otherwise, we would be required to pay an additional cost of 248,000 Ugandan Shillings (\$66). This greatly increased the delivery costs for trades for which we only found a few clients, such as videography and plumbing.

Although our relationship with the KNQA in Nairobi has been fruitful and been a key part of the pilot's progress to date, the pilot has continued to be interrupted by political events due to the certification body sitting within the Kenyan government. For a period of about ten weeks, all activities were put on pause due to the presidential election. This has resulted in the examination dates for all certifications to be postponed by the KNQA until further notice.

Aside from delays, the government costing for this process is quite high with and without sponsorship by the IRC. Currently, it costs \$186 USD (25,000 KES) for one client to undergo an assessment by the KNQA. More discussions need to be held with KNQA and related actors to determine how this process can be more sustainable and accessible to refugees without the intervention of agencies such as the IRC. This is especially critical as RPL is presented as a cost-effective option to other longer and costly training programs.

### **Clients' motivation for skills certification**

When we started the Kampala pilot, we were under the impression that refugees may not have employment opportunities in their trade of interest due to a lack of certificates. However, after realizing how many clients already had businesses not being certified, we asked clients why they wanted to pursue the skills certification program and if they would continue with self-employment or switch to formal employment. We learned that clients viewed skills certification as a pathway to scaling up their business by obtaining tenders and contracts from different private sectors and institutes who will only extend a contract to those with formal certification. Moreover, the formal certification is a key component to finding employment abroad, an opportunity that refugees and host community members alike wish to take advantage of across the East African Community (EAC).

## Next Steps

### **Skill accreditation**

IRC has had discussions with the Ugandan accrediting agencies to scope out a partnership that would transfer the responsibility of embassy coordination for documentation and approval entirely to the government agency. This partnership could serve as an effective pipeline for making accreditation more accessible to refugees in Kampala. At the level of the East African Community (EAC), there have been discussions concerning the equation of certificates in the region given the free movement allowed between countries, and how that extends to free movement of labor and practice of specialized fields. We will be closely monitoring this dialogue and its potential impact for urban refugees in Kampala who come from countries within the EAC. While there is a demonstrated need to target refugees with extensive public education on the availability and processes around skill accreditation to stimulate demand and confidence, it is important to appreciate that significant bottlenecks exist at the government levels.

Given the intense government and inter-government collaboration and lobbying required to ensure smooth accreditation, the Re:BUILD program will halt the pilot in Kampala and pivot to explore advocacy action together with other actors in the sector. This issue was also discussed at the IGAD Kampala Declaration Conference on Jobs and livelihoods held in Nairobi in October 2022. The IRC is in conversation with the IGAD Secretariat to share the results for this pilot and use it as an advocacy tool to have harmonization of policies among member states. In Nairobi, we will hold off on submitting additional cohorts for accreditation until the first cohort has completed the process. Although we see the value in assisting clients through accreditation by creating a pathway through which clients can find more meaningful employment in their field of specialization and facilitate future placements into apprenticeships or private sector linkages (if there is sufficient demand for accreditation), we are concerned that the length of the government processes actively prevents clients from achieving economic self-reliance and keeps clients in a state of economic uncertainty that relies on cobbling together income from various casual jobs unrelated to their skill sets and certificates.

### **Skill certification via RPL**

As we wait for examination dates or exam results from DIT and KNQA for our clients, there are several points that we are weighing for what we need to modify if we were to iterate on this design. For this pilot, in addition to being limited by the skill areas available in partner certifying institutions, we also relied on institutional knowledge and client preferences to compile a list of which skills or trades to include for certification. This was in part due to the low demand for skills certification overall; it made little sense to focus exclusively on marketable skills when recruitment overall proved challenging. In the case that demand is ever high, skills certification pilots would benefit from promoting the certification process for highly marketable or in-demand skills from the private sector and improving post-opportunity linkages.

Similar sustainability discussions need to be held on the current cost of certification. Both with and without NGO support, recognition of prior learning is costly and is well beyond what refugees and vulnerable hosts can afford. Moreover, the barriers that prevent refugees from successfully certifying or accrediting their skills or degrees requires intense advocacy with various government agencies that cannot be addressed within short-term project timelines or funding. During our pilot, we learned of the incredible multi-year efforts the International Labor Organization (ILO) is spearheading to advocate for improvements to and expansion of skills certification for refugees in Kampala. To minimize duplication of efforts and streamline government advocacy, IRC feels it is best to take a step away from skills certification and accreditation in Kampala. In Kenya, there are plans for a national roll-out of skills certification via recognition of prior learning pending policy approval by the Cabinet. Although the KNQA has confirmed that this is a high priority for this calendar year, there aren't set timelines for launch.



## Take-aways

1. Skills certification and accreditation requires long-term funding to engage in proactive, years-long advocacy with government agencies to remove barriers for refugees.
2. Skills accreditation requires inter-governmental goodwill and intense government and embassy collaboration. Not all embassies are willing to cooperate in this process. The process is also problematic for political refugees. The reality of what can be accredited is not the same for all refugees and is heavily dependent upon existing national examination boards in countries of origin
3. Skills certification is not only relevant for formal employment but also for scaling up small businesses, and should be included as a part of the self-employment pathway for clients only if providing skills certification is cost-effective and efficient
4. While skill certification options have been presented as easy to attain and cost-effective, they are quite costly and not affordable for the intended target. Unless the processes are streamlined, bureaucracies removed and sustainable costing models adopted, the options will remain impractical for vulnerable refugees and hosts.
5. Socializing skills certification with community leaders and members takes time and requires setting a minimum understanding of skill level. There is need for extensive public education on what skill certification is, including the requirements, process, and costs, and for whom it is most appropriate in terms of time and resources best spent.



## Acknowledgement

The Re:BUiLD Program is being implemented in partnership with the IKEA Foundation. The Program brings together local authorities, local and international partners, refugee-led organizations and community-based organizations.

These pilots wouldn't have been possible without the dedication of the Re:BUiLD implementation team: Peter Ecau, Vitaline Ajambo, Gerald Lee, Boniface Odhiambo, and Moses Onyancha. This brief was a collective effort of the implementation team and broader Re:BUiLD research team. Belinda Muya, Clare Clingain.